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->From the Editor's Keyboard
"*****"

"Saying it like it is!"

I know that I'll regret saying it, because I'll jinx myself by doing so, but we've finally seen some nice weather around here. "Normal" weather, but it's been nice to see the sun for a change and no need for long sleeves! Wanna know how bad it's been around here? We haven't even bothered to open up our pool this year - no point, especially at this late point in the summer season!

I don't have much to say this week. It's been another long week at work, and I'm tired again. It's tough to think about editorial commentary and write about it when you're exhausted! So, let's just move along this week and get right to this week's issue - enjoy!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho, friends and neighbors. This is going to be a very short column... VERY short. You see, my service provider just stopped providing access to the UseNet. And without access to UseNet, there isn't a way to get UseNet messages.

I'll work something out... hopefully by next week, and be up and running as soon as possible. If anyone has any info on a free service that allows access to the UseNet (please don't recommend DejaNews... I hate the interface BIG TIME!), please drop me a line at computerjoe@mail.com and I'll jump right on it.

Meanwhile, back in the real world, the Senate has been deliberating on Judge Sotomayor's nomination to the Supreme Court, there's lots of hubbub about Michael Jackson's death and kids and family, and the conservatives are still whining about the President's health care and stimulus packages.

Of course, all of the conservative senators and congressmen who have spoken

so heatedly about not taking or using stimulus money have made sure that they've gotten their own pet projects inserted into the bill. Personally, I think that any senator who voted against the stimulus package should have to go back to their home state and explain why their voters aren't going to see a damned dime of the stimulus money.

On the subject of "The Health Care Plan", I have one problem... it's misnamed. We don't have a health care problem. We have a health care INSURANCE problem. The average cost of health care insurance is now higher than the cost of food. For my own minimal, abysmally inadequate health care coverage, the cost is what I consider unconscionable. To feed me in an adequate, even opulent fashion, it costs between 50 and 70 dollars a week. That's with milk for my cereal and steaks and chops and veggies and bread for my pbj and even a couple of goodies thrown in. The cost for my health care insurance is \$148.00 per week. That's right. As much as three times the cost of my food. And if you want to amortize the \$1500.00 deductible on my insurance over 12 months (should I need health care), the cost becomes almost \$177 per week.

And let's be clear here: This is not the cost for health care. It's the cost of INSURANCE... basically a bet with the insurance company that I'm going to have something serious happen to me that will require medical attention within the next 12 months.

How can any company justify this? Well, they'll tell you that its based upon a complex set of actuarial tables and probabilities and it's the rising cost of a hospital stay that's causing the whole thing.

Don't you believe it. Just open up the Wall Street Journal or log on to a page that lists company profits or stock dividends. A lot of these places are the ones handing out multi-million dollar bonuses while denying coverage for <expletive deleted> cancer treatments.

It's true that things are a lot more expensive now than they used to be; high-tech diagnostic and treatment equipment like PET/CT scanners and the machines that irradiate tumors and such.. Who could have guessed 50 years ago that a piece of medical equipment could cost multiple millions of dollars?

And the drugs that are used... there's another big-ticket item. The cost of some of these drugs is just insane. Of course, being part of the health care system, the drug companies will cry and moan about the high cost of development and funding next-gen drugs and having to pay their insurance and all the rest of it... all while doling out multi-million dollar bonuses to their higher-ups. Not even the brilliant individuals who make these wonder drugs reality. The corporate types who probably couldn't tell a pill from a capsule without a research report.

And the salaries for doctors and nurses... every hospital you look at will bemoan the fact that they have to pay such high salaries. Well, let me tell ya, for what nurses do, and for the number of patients they do it FOR, they're under-paid! And doctors? Well ask a doctor why he should be making so much money and they'll say that they need to pay off their schooling and.... wait for it... INSURANCE! Yes, malpractice insurance is a killer. If you trace it back to the insurance companies, they'll tell you that the high cost of malpractice insurance is due to 'frivolous lawsuits'. Don't buy into that either. The fact is that the amount paid out on all malpractice lawsuits annually amounts to less than one percent of the premiums they collect. They'll also mention the necessity of retaining a large staff of lawyers

Sales of video game hardware and software were down by around one-third in June compared to the same month last year, according to data released late Thursday. After initially showing positive growth as the U.S. slid into recession, the latest figures mark the fourth month of declines and the largest year-on-year decline in almost 9 years.

"The first half of the year has been tough largely due to comparisons against a stellar first half performance last year, but still, this level of decline is certainly going to cause some pain and reflection in the industry," said Anita Frazier, a games analyst with NPD Group, in an e-mailed statement.

The entire video game market in the U.S. was worth US\$1.2 billion in June, down 31 percent from the same period last year, according to NPD Group. Software accounted for more than half the market with sales of \$625.8 million, down 29 percent on June last year, while game hardware sales came in at \$382.6 million, down 38 percent.

Those declines mark the worst year-on-year since September 2000, when the market witnessed a 40 percent fall, and it could get worse.

"This is one of the first months where I think the impact of the economy is clearly reflected in the sales numbers," said Frazier. "While the aggregate of content may not be as strong as what we saw in the first half of last year, and while the consumer base willing to spend dollars on hardware at the current price points may be thinning, the size of the decline could also point to consumers deferring limited discretionary spending until a big event (must-have new title, hardware price cut) compels them to spend."

The top selling device of the month was the Nintendo DS which shifted 766,500 units in the month. The strong sales were spurred by the April launch of the DSi, a new version of the popular handheld gaming device.

The only other competing handheld, Sony's PlayStation Portable, sold 163,500 units. Sony has promised a new version of the PSP for later this year so many gamers will likely hold off on buying the device until the new model appears. It's due to be launched in the U.S. in October.

Among game consoles, Nintendo's Wii sold 361,700 units in the month to make it the top ranked console. Microsoft's Xbox 360 came in second with sales of 240,600 units and was followed by the PlayStation 3 at 164,700 units and the PlayStation 2 at 152,700 units.

During the month the top-ranked game was "Prototype," an action thriller in which gamers play a genetically-mutated character with shape shifting abilities. The Activision Blizzard game, which launched on June 9, is available for the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 and PC platforms but it was the Xbox version that topped the chart with sales of 419,900 copies in the month.

Second most popular game of the month was the pro-wrestling "UFC 2009: Undisputed" title from THQ. The game launched in late May and sold more than a million copies last month for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. In June the Xbox version remained in the ranking with sales of 338,300 units.

The top-ten list was also notable for the absence of a game: Wii Play. For the first time in 29 months the game hasn't made the top ten

ranking, although other Wii games claim four of the positions.

The top ten best-selling games in the U.S. in June were, according to NPD Group:

- 1) Prototype, Xbox 360, 419,900 units
- 2) UFC 2009: Undisputed, Xbox 360, 338,300 units
- 3) EA Sports Active Bundle, Wii, 289,100 units
- 4) Tiger Woods PGA Tour 10, Wii, 272,400 units
- 5) Wii Fit, Wii, 271,600 units
- 6) Night Fight Round 2, Xbox 360, 260,800 units
- 7) Night Fight Round 2, PlayStation 3, 210,300 units
- 8) Mario Kart with Wheel, Wii, 202,100 units
- 9) Red Faction Guerrilla, Xbox 360, 199,400 units
- 10) Infamous, PlayStation 3, 192,700 units.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

China Bans Electro-Shock Therapy for Internet Addicts

China has banned electro-shock therapy as a treatment for Internet addiction, citing uncertainty in the safety and effectiveness of the practice after criticism in the local media.

The Ministry of Health announcement followed recent media reports about a controversial psychiatrist in Linyi, Shandong Province, who administered electric currents to nearly 3,000 teenagers in an attempt to rid them of their Internet habit.

The Chinese government has led a campaign for over a year against Internet addiction, saying young people's excessive time in Internet cafes, known as Web bars in Chinese, is hurting their studies and damaging family life.

"Electroshock therapy for Internet addiction...has no foundation in clinical research or evidence and therefore is not appropriate for clinical application," read the notice, posted on the ministry website (www.moh.gov.cn).

The world's most populous country also has the world's largest Internet

population, with almost 300 million users at the end of last year, according to the China Internet Network Information Center.

Problems caused by Internet over-use are also on the rise, especially among young Chinese seeking an escape from the heavy burden of parental expectations. There are over 200 organizations offering treatment for Internet disorders in China.

The developer of the "electric impact therapy" is Doctor Yang Yongxin, also known as "Uncle Yang," who runs a boot camp called the Internet Addiction Treatment Center at Linyi Mental Hospital, the China Youth Daily said.

Patients are given psychotropic drugs as well as electro-shocks, at a cost of 5,500 yuan (\$805) a month.

Strictly trained in military ways and accompanied by their parents, the young patients are prohibited from outside contact.

Most of them were sent to the hospital by force, the China Youth Daily added.

Neither Yang nor his six colleagues at the camp were qualified psychotherapists, it said.

Microsoft and Yahoo Reported Close To Search Deal

Microsoft and Yahoo are reportedly close to a search and advertising deal that could be announced next week. Microsoft executives are said to be in Silicon Valley for final talks, and CEO Steve Ballmer is reportedly monitoring their efforts.

The All Things Digital blog reported that the executives include Yusuf Mehdi, Microsoft's senior vice president for online; Satya Nadella, senior vice president for research and development; and Dr. Qi Lu, president of Microsoft's Online Services Group and a former Yahoo search executive.

The blog said the deal would involve "Microsoft paying Yahoo several billion dollars upfront to take over its search advertising business and guarantee certain payments back to Yahoo." That would be in line with Yahoo CEO Carol Bartz's comments in May that Yahoo was talking with Microsoft and any deal for Yahoo's search assets would require "boatloads of money."

All Things Digital said Yahoo is likely to lead in selling display advertising for the companies.

A deal could help Yahoo and Microsoft grab more of the search advertising market dominated by Google, which had 65 percent in June, according to comScore. Yahoo was second with 19.5 percent and Microsoft a distant third at 8.4 percent despite the launch of its Bing search engine last month.

Microsoft launched an unsuccessful hostile takeover bid for Yahoo in 2008, but Yahoo's board said the \$47.5 billion offer was too low. That rejection infuriated stockholders and led to the resignation of Yahoo

CEO and co-founder Jerry Yang and brought in Bartz.

Office 2010 Test Opens; Free Web Versions Later

Microsoft Corp. is giving a select group of technology-savvy testers an early peek at its Office 2010 software, but it's keeping a key development - free Web-based versions of programs such as Word and Excel - under wraps a little while longer.

Monday's launch of this "technical preview" indicates Office 2010 is still on track for release in the early part of next year.

Microsoft is updating the highly profitable desktop software package to add more ways for people to work simultaneously on documents, organize their e-mail and edit videos and photos, among other changes. And for the first time, Microsoft is adding free companion versions that run in a Web browser.

Microsoft Office is by far the most popular software package worldwide for making presentations, spreadsheets and other documents, and its dominance is in no immediate danger. But the company is trying to defend against a long-developing trend in which software is moving from the desktop to the Web. Google Inc. has been pushing its own free, Web-based programs for more than two years, though it has yet to gain much traction with corporations.

With Office 2010, Microsoft must decide how much software it can give away online without undermining its lucrative desktop software business. If it doesn't make the right calculation, the software maker could find itself in the same position as newspapers that gave online content away and now are struggling to replace print revenue.

In Microsoft's case, the "Home and Student" version of Office 2007 is listed at \$150, though it can be found on Amazon.com for \$90. Such sales deliver attractive margins - in 2008, the division responsible for Office logged \$12.4 billion in profit on nearly \$20 billion in revenue.

The Office 2010 Web programs will be Microsoft's first real attempt at an online office package. In 2007, Microsoft launched something called Office Live Workspace, which let people view and comment on documents, but it lacked tools for creating and editing files.

The browser-based programs are on a different development cycle from the desktop programs, and Microsoft says the Web versions' "technical preview" will be ready in August.

The Web version of Office 2010 will be free to consumers, in a version supported by advertising. Microsoft will let companies with long-term Office licensing agreements install the online programs on their servers for no extra charge. Companies will also be able to buy subscriptions to access the programs through Microsoft-operated data centers.

Microsoft has not said how much Office 2010 will cost, only that it will sell five variations on the suite, two for big corporations and three available to consumers and small businesses.

Microsoft says people attending its annual partner conference this week

in New Orleans will be among the tens of thousands invited to try the new software.

After Bing's First Month, Microsoft Still No. 3

Microsoft Corp.'s redesigned search site remains a distant third to Google and Yahoo despite getting a slight boost in its first month.

ComScore Inc. estimates that Bing, the new site, snagged 8.4 percent of U.S. Web searches in June, up from 8 percent in May.

It appears Microsoft's slight gain was Yahoo's loss. Google's share stayed steady at 65 percent. But Yahoo's dipped to 19.6 percent in June, losing about as much as Bing gained.

Google's dominance means a bigger slice of revenue from search advertising, the small text ads that appear next to search results.

Microsoft has been trying to catch up for years, both with Live Search, its previous Web search incarnation, and by trying to buy Yahoo. The Redmond, Wash.-based software maker is trying again with Bing, which it says does a better job than competitors for searches related to travel, shopping and health.

Analysts were underwhelmed by the June results. Barclays Capital analyst Douglas Anmuth wrote that he expected Bing's share to come in between 10 percent and 11 percent. Anmuth reported the comScore figures in a research note Wednesday.

"Bing doesn't exactly set the world on fire," Benjamin Schachter, an analyst for Broadpoint AmTech, wrote in a note to investors. "We continue to believe much of Bing's early interest is being driven by curiosity and early adopters, and not from fundamentally better search experiences or outcomes."

Microsoft executives have said that they don't expect an immediate change in Bing's search share, but the comScore estimates were lower than early June reports showing Microsoft's share topping 10 percent.

Puppy Love Blooms on India Dog Dating Websites

Leo is affectionate, likes stuffed toys, eats fish and is a hit with ladies looking for love on online. Not bad, for a 3-year-old Golden Retriever.

Leo is just one of hundreds of dogs being signed up to a crop of dog dating websites in India by doting owners seeking a mate or a companion for their pet.

"A lot of dog owners want their dogs to have doggy friends with whom they can play and have their own fun time," says Geetika Nigam, who launched the 6,500-user-strong Puppy Love (<http://www.puppylove.in/>) community two years ago.

Just like human dating sites, dog owners can upload photos, blog, search for the perfect match and set up dates.

Many of the eligible dogs are pedigreed but some pet owners also advertise for strays they have adopted.

"People are very happy that finally someone has taken up this cause," says Mumbai-based Mekhala Lobo, who spotted a business opportunity in her newly launched Date Your Pet (<http://dateyourpet.co.in/>) website.

"Believe me, in the dog world, finding a mate is next to impossible," the MBA student said.

And it's especially hard for the boys.

Nigam, who owns a dog-grooming business, says a skewed sex ratio ensures females have the upper hand in the dog-meets-dog world. "Families generally prefer keeping male dogs so females are always in demand," she said.

But, just like humans, not all dogs are lucky in love.

Ishita Sukhadwala set up DogMateOnline (<http://dogmateonline.com/>) in 2008 to help her cousin's 6-year-old Doberman Rocky find a mate. "It was more out of necessity than anything else," she said.

Rocky had a profile set up on the website but died before a potential match was found.

Sukhadwala and co-promoter Robina Gupta dedicated the website to Rocky and now help nearly 5,000 registered members find a canine companion for their pets.

Pet ownership has boomed in India, thanks to its growing ranks of wealthy, middle and upper class professionals who are also driving sales of luxury goods.

But for the vast majority of the country, which lives on between \$1 and \$2 a day, pets are not an option. Stray dogs are also often beaten, herded into trucks, poisoned and dumped into pits by municipality health teams.

First Trip to Moon Recreated for Internet Generation

Man's first trip to the moon is about to blast off anew in an online recreation intended to enthrall an Internet generation not yet born when the US mission made history 40 years ago.

A virtual reenactment of the Apollo 11 mission that put men on the moon and brought them back safely will launch Thursday online at wechoosethemoon.org and incorporate new-age communication tools such as email alerts and Twitter.

Thursday is the 40th anniversary of the day astronauts rocketed into space to fulfill late president John F. Kennedy's goal of showing the prowess of democracy by beating the former Soviet Union to the moon.

"President Barack Obama is seen as inspiring because he challenged people to do more than they envisioned themselves doing," said Tom McNaught, spokesman for the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum which is behind the online project.

"We are saying there was a president in the 1960s who felt the same way. Our mission is to share that legacy with new generations."

Kennedy in 1961 made the NASA space program a top national priority because he thought it critical to "beat the Russians to the moon," according to historians at the library.

The United States was being left behind in the space race by what was then the communist Soviet Union, which had launched the Sputnik satellite in 1957 and put cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin into orbit around the Earth in 1961.

"Landing on the moon before the Russians was an absolute priority," McNaught said.

"The only way to beat the Russians in the space race was to land on the moon before they did. President Kennedy wanted to show the world that democracy as a form of government could keep up with communism, if not surpass it."

Apollo 11 progress and highlights from the launch count-down to July 20, when astronauts Neil Armstrong and Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin became the first people to walk on the moon, will be replayed online on their original time line.

Actual communications between the crew and mission control technicians will be streamed at the website as well as "tweets" on hot microblogging service Twitter, according to McNaught.

NASA recordings, film footage, photographs, and audio broadcasts have been woven into an interactive online replay of the drama of the mission.

"People are going to be able to hear, see and watch a lot more than they were able to in 1969; no media outlet covered it minute-by-minute for the four days," McNaught said.

Email alerts will let people know the moment on July 20 when the space module landed on the moon.

"We created something interactive so young people can really get a sense of the achievement in 1969 when a man walked on the moon."

Wechoosethemoon.org website will remain online for at least a year, with visitors being able to replay selected portions of the mission at their convenience.

"It is an anniversary being marked around the world and we are just delighted to have a part in it," McNaught said.

"We have so many Americans who weren't born at the time... There are so many new communication tools and so much new technology."

Kennedy was assassinated in 1963 and was not alive to see his goal of reaching the moon realized.

Microsoft Stores To Open Near Apple Stores in Fall

Microsoft Corp will open stores close to those of Apple Inc this fall, according to its chief operating officer, as it looks to win back the initiative in the battle for Main Street PC and gadget buyers.

"We're going to have some retail stores opened up right next door to Apple stores this fall," said Microsoft's Kevin Turner at a webcast conference in New Orleans on Wednesday. "Stay tuned."

The world's largest software company announced in February that it would open its own chain of branded stores as it looks to counter Apple's successful foray into retailing, hiring a former Wal-Mart Stores Inc executive to run them.

Few details have emerged since then. A Microsoft spokeswoman confirmed on Wednesday only that "there will be scenarios where we have stores in proximity to Apple," and that some stores would open "in the fall timeframe."

Canada: Facebook Violates Privacy Law

Canadian officials on Thursday said Facebook was breaking national privacy law by holding on to personal information from closed accounts at the social-networking service.

A Canada privacy commission report expressed "an overarching concern" that privacy information Facebook provides its more than 250 million users is "often confusing or incomplete."

Facebook said it is working with the commission to resolve its concerns in ways that safeguard privacy without disrupting user-experiences at the world's most popular online social-networking community.

"Overall, we are looking for practical solutions that operate at scale and respect the fact that people come to share and not to hide," Facebook chief privacy officer Chris Kelly told AFP.

"We continue our dialogue and have every confidence that we will come to acceptable conclusions. I think the concerns are fully resolvable."

Canadian Privacy Commissioner Jennifer Stoddart said there are several areas in which Palo Alto, California-based Facebook needs to bring its practices in line with privacy law in Canada.

The conclusion is based on an investigation prompted by a complaint from the Canadian Internet Policy and Public Interest Clinic.

"It's clear that privacy issues are top of mind for Facebook, and yet we found serious privacy gaps in the way the site operates," Stoddart said in a release.

Facebook's policy of holding onto personal information from deactivated accounts is a violation of Canadian law established by a Personal

Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act, according to the report.

The law requires organizations to retain personal information only for as long as is necessary to meet appropriate purposes, the commissioner said.

The report calls on Facebook to make privacy policies and options more transparent to ensure that the nearly 12 million Canadians using the service can properly manage personal information.

Facebook does not adequately restrict access that outside software developers have to personal information people put on profile pages, according to the commissioner.

A key to Facebook's popularity has been that third-party developers are free to make fun, functional, or hip mini-programs that people can install on profile pages.

The report estimated that 950,000 developers in 180 countries craft Facebook applications, with games and quiz programs among favorites.

Facebook has agreed to adopt many recommendations in the report.

"We urge Facebook to implement all of our recommendations to further enhance their site, ensure they are in compliance with privacy law, and ultimately show themselves as models of privacy," said Assistant Commissioner Elizabeth Denham.

The privacy commissioner's office gave Facebook 30 days to comply with all its recommendations and noted that it can go to federal court for enforcement.

Facebook will soon introduce additional privacy features that it believes will address the commission's concerns, according to Kelly.

"Facebook has made privacy a core part of its business, and is the industry leader in developing and deploying privacy tools and advocating their use," Kelly said.

"We believe that the very reason Facebook is popular in Canada is because the site offers people a way to share information, enables them to choose what information they share with whom, and is very easy to use."

Twitter Hacked By Old Technique, Again

Breaking into someone's e-mail can be child's play for a determined hacker, as Twitter Inc. employees have learned the hard way, again.

For the third time this year, the San Francisco-based company was the victim of a security breach stemming from a simple end-run around its defenses. In the latest case, a hacker got the password for an employee's personal e-mail account - possibly by guessing, or by correctly answering a security question - and worked from there to steal confidential company documents.

The techniques used by the attackers highlight the dangers of a broader trend promoted by Google Inc. and others toward storing more data

online, instead of on computers under your control.

The shift toward doing more over the Web - a practice known as "cloud computing" - means that mistakes employees make in their private lives can do serious damage to their employers, because a single e-mail account can tie the two worlds together.

Stealing the password for someone's Gmail account, for example, not only gives the hacker access to that person's personal e-mail, but also to any other Google applications they might use for work, like those used to create spreadsheets or presentations.

That's apparently what happened to Twitter, which shares confidential data within the company through the Google Apps package that incorporates e-mail, word processing, spreadsheet, calendar and other Google services for \$50 per user per year.

Co-founder Biz Stone wrote in a blog posting Wednesday that the personal e-mail of an unnamed Twitter administrative employee was hacked about a month ago, and through that the attacker got access to the employee's Google Apps account.

Separately, the wife of co-founder Evan Williams also had her personal e-mail hacked around the same time, Stone wrote. Through that, the attacker got access to Williams' personal Amazon and PayPal accounts.

Stone said the attacks are "about Twitter being in enough of a spotlight that folks who work here can become targets."

Some of the material the hacker posted online from the Google Apps documents was more embarrassing than damaging, like floor plans for new office space and a pitch for a TV show about the increasingly popular online messaging service.

Twitter says only one user account was potentially compromised because a screenshot of the account was included among the stolen documents. The value in hijacking a user's account is limited, as those attacks are mainly used to post fake messages and try to trick the victim's friends into clicking on links that will infect their computers.

Sensitive Twitter documents were filched, though.

The hacker claims to have employee salaries and credit card numbers, resumes from job applicants, internal meeting reports and growth projections.

TechCrunch, a widely read technology blog, says it was e-mailed the documents, and subsequently published some of them, including financial projections that Twitter drew up in February. The forecast envisioned Twitter generating its first revenue in the current quarter, with sales of about \$400,000 and about 60 employees. By the end of next year, Twitter expected to employ about 345 people with annual revenue of about \$140 million, according to the documents published by TechCrunch.

Stone said in an e-mail that most of the documents TechCrunch has access to are "speculative exercises."

In his blog post, Stone said the stolen documents "are not polished or ready for prime time and they're certainly not revealing some big, secret plan for taking over the world," but said they are sensitive

enough that their public release could jeopardize relationships with Twitter's partners.

Stone said the company is talking to lawyers about "what this theft means for Twitter, the hacker, and anyone who accepts and subsequently shares or publishes these stolen documents."

What the attacks on Twitter show is that Web sites don't need to get compromised in the traditional sense to put its users and employees at risk.

Hackers don't need to find a vulnerability in the site itself, or plant a virus on an employee's computer, to sneak inside.

The easier approach is much more low-tech: All they need to find is an employee who uses weak passwords for his or her e-mail accounts, or has security questions that are easy to answer with a little information about the person.

It's an old strategy that's becoming more and more valuable as people's personal and work lives merge online.

It can be trivial to guess someone's passwords, as former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin found out during the election, when her personal e-mail was hacked and screenshots were posted online. The attacker sneaked in by accurately guessing the answer's to Palin's security questions, based on information about her and her family that was already online.

Password-guessing programs are also a common hacking tool. An attacker runs the program against an account, and if it's allowed to try lots of times and the password isn't very complicated, the hacker's in.

Twitter was hit twice before this year in similar incidents.

In an attack against Twitter in January, a Twitter support staffer's account was compromised using a password-guessing-program. The hacker got administrative access to the site. The Twitter feeds for Barack Obama, Britney Spears and other celebrities were used to send out bogus messages. A similar attack happened in May.

The attacks on Twitter serve as a reminder of why many corporations are reluctant to jump on the cloud computing bandwagon. Outsourcing sensitive jobs can save money but also open up companies to more risk, because their data aren't entirely under their control.

Another trend online is for Web-based services to streamline access by letting users log into each others' sites with the same usernames and passwords. Facebook and other services have begun to do this, raising possible security risks.

The lesson from Twitter's latest security troubles is an old one: Use strong passwords, which include some combination of letters and numbers, and for companies, be careful about how many accounts are linked to the same username and password combination.

EBay Inc is pulling the plug on its annual eBay Live! event, eschewing the large networking affair for a series of more intimate gatherings to connect sellers.

The company notified sellers on its internal blog on Monday that it would no longer hold its planned August 2010 event in Orlando, Florida. Instead, eBay will host "more local events that don't require costly travel" for attendees, said president of eBay Marketplaces Lorrie Norrington.

EBay had earlier canceled its 2009 conference.

"EBay: On Location" will begin in Orlando in February, then travel to various cities before winding up in San Jose, California, the company's headquarters, in August. The series of smaller events will still bring together eBay sellers and provide opportunities to learn about selling on eBay, Norrington said in the blog.

The three-day event that included networking, talks with eBay executives and forums on how to benefit from eBay's site, first began in 2002.

But recent dissatisfaction among some sellers over changes eBay has made to its pricing, listings and policies had altered the tone of the convention.

At its peak, eBay Live! attracted some 15,000 attendees, according to AuctionBytes blogger Ina Steiner, who noted that the once-festive atmosphere - where executives were greeted with rousing standing ovations - had turned combative.

"Last year's conference in Chicago was so contentious that a convention-center worker observing one session told me it was like attending a union meeting," Steiner wrote.

The recession has also had an effect on corporations' marketing efforts, with many cutting back on lavishly produced events in favor of more low-key meetings.

The company, which turns 15 next year, is trying to reignite its marketplaces division where growth has decelerated in recent years. EBay is trying to move away from the online auctions business that made it famous and instead focus on fixed-price sales, which often benefit larger sellers.

Google Health To Safeguard "End-of-Life" Wishes

Google has invited people to store "end-of-life" wishes at its free online health records management service.

Google Health made available "advance directive" forms on which people can specify what they want doctors to do or not do in the event they are too ill or injured to express their wishes.

Forms created with collaboration from an organization specializing in elder care are available free for download online and can be customized to the laws in US states, according to Roni Zeiger and Julie Wilner of

the Google Health team.

"An advance directive allows you to determine your end-of-life wishes so that your family and doctor can honor them if you get sick and are unable to communicate," Wilner and Zeiger said in a message at Google's official blog.

"The decision to sign an advance directive is an important and personal one, and Google Health now makes it a little bit easier."

Google Health recently added a feature that lets people upload scanned medical records to profiles for storage or selective sharing.

"We would like to reduce the unnecessary use of paper in patient care," Zeiger and Wilner wrote.

"We hope someday we'll move beyond paper, but until then Google Health can help you store your paper medical records electronically, including an advance directive, in one safe place," they wrote

China's Internet Users Outnumber U.S. Population

China's Internet users have surpassed the U.S. population in number, and more Chinese than ever are using e-commerce and accessing the Web through mobile phones, according to official statistics.

China had 338 million Internet users at the end of last month, the most in any country, the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) said late Thursday.

Chatting on message boards, cruising around social networking sites and pursuing other entertainment were among the most popular activities for Web users, the center said in a report posted on its Web site. The number of Internet users who watched videos online rose 10 percent from six months ago. More than one-fourth now shop online.

China also led the world in the number of registered Web sites, nearly 13 million, using its .cn top-level domain, the report said.

Almost all of the reported figures rose substantially this year. Nearly all of the Internet users had broadband, which China is working to link to more remote areas

But the report gave mixed signals on the prospects for mobile broadband, which China is also pushing. The number of Chinese who used mobile phones to access some online services rose to 155 million, but just one in four of those people said they would use 3G to surf the Web in the future, the report said.

High prices and limited coverage so far have kept down 3G take-up despite aggressive marketing by China's three mobile carriers.

The report also showed the severity of malware and other security problems in China. Over 100 million Chinese had passwords or account numbers stolen in the first of this year, and almost twice as many experienced virus or trojan attacks, it said.

Despite the huge numbers, only one in four Chinese is already an Internet user, the report said.

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